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SUBJECT: VP ADEL: JAM AND SADRISTS DOWN BUT NOT OUT, IRAN
REASSESSING IRAQ POLICY

Classified By: Ambassador Ryan C. Crocker for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: In an April 16 meeting, Vice President Adel Abdel Mehdi told the Ambassador that Sadrist insiders have confirmed his analysis that Muqtada al-Sadr (who is in Iran, not Iraq) is mainly a symbolic leader of a fragmented and failing movement comprised of diverse bands of thugs, sheikhs, and politicians backed by armed criminal bands. He claimed the Jaysh al-Mehdi (JAM) had "exhausted" its armed strength in late March but remains a resilient foe as the GOI embarks upon a crackdown on militias in Baghdad and elsewhere. The Ambassador advised that the GOI address this complex situation with a complex approach that encourages political participation and provides economic incentives in order to isolate those whose goal is to wage war upon the state. Adel claimed Iran appears "confused" by events in Iraq and is likely reassessing its Iraq policy: he pressed the USG to seize this opportunity to engage in dialogue with Tehran. In response to Adel's observation about Iraq's new spirit of political unity, the Ambassador stressed the importance of translating such unity into progress such as the return of blocs to the GOI and passage of a hydrocarbons law. The Ambassador apprised Adel of his recent talks with Saudi Arabian officials that pressed for Arab engagement with Iraq, and Adel expressed weary resignation that Arab neighbors appear unwilling to embrace the Maliki government. End Summary.

"Firm" GOI Strikes Fragmented and Failing Sadrist Trend

¶2. (C) Adel told the Ambassador and NSC Senior Director McGurk that the late-March GOI security crackdown on JAM in Basrah revealed that JAM and the Sadrist Trend are not as cohesive or potent as previously believed. JAM "did its utmost" and "exhausted its strength" to battle the GOI in Basrah and tried to ignite uprisings in other south-central cities but failed on all counts, just as JAM failed to take Najaf in 2004 or to capture Karbala last August (outside of certain Baghdad areas, Adel explained, Sadrist strength is now confined to Maysan and an area between Kut al-Hay in south Wasit and Qilat al-Sukkar in north Dhi Qar). This does not mean, however, that the JAM is unable to re-group or exploit GOI "weak points." Therefore, the GOI security operation against militia presence must continue, and Adel stressed that Prime Minister Maliki has broad political support for the operation. Adel said Basrah showed that armed Sadrists can be defeated only when the GOI shows a "firm security approach:" even though the Iraqi Security Forces were under-prepared and faced a more numerous foe with better weapons, he asserted, the ISF was able to defeat JAM fighters because local people rallied to the GOI side when it became clear that Maliki was "firm" and would not engage in negotiations with the Sadrists, which would have been seen as GOI weakness and exploited fully by JAM. Had JAM prevailed in Basrah, Adel warned, this likely would have resulted in a rapid series of "collapses" throughout south-central Iraq and

Baghdad. "Basrah exposed JAM's weakness and the government must now exploit this weakness."

13. (C) The Vice President insisted the GOI is strong enough to defeat any political party but cannot defeat a broad-based nationalist or sectarian movement, adding that the Sadrism Trend is neither. Rather, it lacks "a nationalist agenda and an economic agenda" and is left only with an anti-occupation message that no longer has the resonance of a few years ago. The Trend established itself in Baghdad and elsewhere by identifying areas where GOI provision of public services like cooking fuel and petrol distribution was particularly weak and then taking control over such services: however, once the Trend had established control, their mafia-type tactics so alienated the local population that people pined for the return of GOI services, no matter how inefficient. Adel claimed ISCI/Badr could have taken on and defeated JAM alone after numerous JAM provocations "but that would have taken us back to the old ways" and decided instead to urge the GOI to exercise legitimate state law enforcement authority. He said the Trend has "some courageous teenagers" but in fact is a divided collection of a few well-organized JAM units, "Special Groups" working under JAM cover, a larger number of poorly-organized armed bands headed by criminals, and some political elements. Muqtada al-Sadr is only a symbolic leader, and actual control over these fragmented groups is exercised mostly by sheikhs and former students of Muqtada's late father. He said one such leader, Adnan Shahmani, confirmed this analysis, and Adel offered to arrange a meeting between Shahmani and the Ambassador. While Adel said he previously believed that Muqtada al-Sadr had left Iran and was back in Najaf, Adel said a source in Iran had told him recently that Sadr had not left Iran.

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14. (C) The Ambassador stated that the GOI has joined the battle against the presence of armed groups and cannot stop half-way or adopt halting measures. He suggested the GOI address the complex make-up of the Sadrism movement by first defining the enemy and then adopting a carefully-considered and complex approach that encourages political participation and provides economic incentives to divide the movement and give Sadrists a clear choice: join the political process or face the consequences of waging war against a legitimate GOI.

He reminded Adel that the Sadrists came very close to uniting their ranks and rallying popular support in Basrah, and advised against any measures that increase Sadrism legitimacy and decrease GOI legitimacy. In reply to the Ambassador's query regarding an apparent new-found GOI willingness to engage southern Shia tribes to assist in maintaining security, Adel said tribes were playing a positive role in Basrah. Iraqi history has shown that tribal engagement is a risky matter, he continued, and that tribal loyalty can shift easily and quickly due to shifts in a tribe's perceptions of its own interests; therefore, the GOI must move cautiously and make sure that others do not seek to exploit tribal links. He was openly incredulous when the Ambassador explained that the USG has stayed away from Sahwah-style engagement with southern tribes -- convinced that USG has indeed done so, despite the Iraqi Government's policy (until now) against a Southern Sahwah strategy.

Iran's Iraq Policy Review?

15. (C) When asked about Iran's current dealings in Iraq, Adel said Iran appeared "confused" about Iraq and believes Tehran is "reassessing" its approach on Iraq. For this reason, he continued, this is the right moment for the USG and GOI to "do better" by pressuring Tehran to end supply of arms to Special Groups and engage in direct discussions with Iran. He said ISCI Chairman Abdel Aziz al-Hakim had met recently with a number of Iranian government officials in Tehran such as Ali Larijani, all of whom expressed negativity toward a bilateral USG-GOI strategic framework agreement (though one

such official reportedly pulled Hakim aside and told him to do whatever he felt was in Iraq's interests). You won't settle all issues through talks with the Iranians, Adel said, but you'll be able to take a few steps forward "and assets will be greater than liabilities." The Ambassador pointed to President Bush's April 10 speech, stating that Iran must make a choice about its conduct in Iraq and that we will be watching what it decides to do. He remarked that the Iranians appear to be repeating a ploy they used with success in Lebanon by inviting a wide range of Iraqi political players to Tehran for talks, and then exploiting divisions between them that are revealed in such talks. In particular, he cited the recent sojourns of Ahmad Chalabi and former Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaffri to Iran.

Translate Improved Atmosphere Into Political Achievement

16. (C) Adel remarked on Iraq's new spirit of political unity, noting that relations between fellow Vice President Tareq al-Hashemi and Maliki are much improved and "explosive" pre-Basrah tension between Maliki and the Kurds has largely disappeared. The Ambassador stressed the importance of translating such unity into concrete progress. For example, Tareq al-Hashemi should "get off the fence" and follow through on the much-discussed return of Tawafuq to the GOI cabinet and Maliki, the Kurds and others should come to terms on a hydrocarbons law. Adel said that Tawafuq was discussing with Maliki names of potential cabinet candidates, and he opined that Hashemi appeared serious about Tawafuq's return. Furthermore, Adel revealed recent discussions with Fadhila and Iraqqiyah officials who indicated interest in joining the cabinet, adding that discussions on the oil and gas law had resumed.

"Arabs Don't Trust Us and They Don't Trust You Either"

17. (C) The Ambassador apprised Adel of his recent talks with Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah and other Saudi leaders that pressed for greater Arab engagement with Iraq in order to counter Iranian influence. He remarked that the Saudis remain hesitant about such engagement. Adel said he last had discussions with Saudi officials over a year ago, and was surprised to hear them express support for militias to battle AQI; he later came to surmise that remarks showed that the Saudi leadership was closer to the Sunni Sahwah tribal structure than to Hashemi's Muslim Brotherhood-influenced party. "Arabs don't trust us (the Shia) and they don't trust you either," Adel noted, adding that Arab leaders often refer to the American experience in Iraq as a "catastrophe" and do not believe the USG has a correct policy in Iraq. The

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Ambassador commented on the apparent inability of Arab states to understand that what happens in Iraq affects the security and stability of the region, and Adel expressed weary resignation that Arab neighbors appear unwilling to support the Maliki government.

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